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ARTICLES:

(1) Iwakuni to hold reference on relocation of carrier-borne jets

YOMIURI (Page 2) (Full)
Evening, February 2, 2006

Katsusuke Ihara, mayor of Iwakuni, today decided to hold a referendum to ask citizens whether or not they would support a plan to relocate carrier-borne aircraft from Atsugi Naval Air Station in Kanagawa Prefecture to Iwakuni Air Station in Yamaguchi Prefecture. The plan was included in the interim report on the realignment of the US forces in Japan. Coordination is now under way to set the vote for March 12.

Iwakuni's ordinance on referendums stipulates that a referendum can be held at the mayor's instance. The poll will likely adopt an alternative formula, under which voters cast a ballot for or against the relocation plan. If a voter turnout falls short of 50 PERCENT, the referendum will become void, and ballot counting will not take place. The outcome of the proposed referendum does not have binding authority, but the ordinance provides that the mayor, the local assembly and residents should respect the outcome.

The interim report on the realignment of US forces in Japan, released by the governments of Japan and the US last October, incorporated the relocation of 57 carrier-borne jets from Atsugi Naval Air Station to Iwakuni Air Station. Mayor Iwakuni's position on the issue has been that the plan should be withdrawn. He had hinted at the possibility of holding a referendum at town meetings, "A referendum is one option in the event of the views of citizens and the municipal assembly splitting over the issue."

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In the meantime, voices calling for a conditional strike have been heard in the municipal assembly with one member saying, "We should hold talks with the central government on specific matters, under the premise that city will accept the proposal." Some of the chiefs of seven towns and cities, which are to be integrated into Iwakuni on Mar. 20, had voiced objection: "A referendum is not suitable," or, "The proposed date is too close to the date for the integration."

(2) Mixture of motives of wanting to upgrading Defense Agency to ministry status; Defense Agency wishes to promote upgrade argument; Growing reluctance in New Komeito

YOMIURI (Page 4) (Full)
February 2, 2006

In the wake of a bid-rigging scandal involving Defense Facilities Administration Agency (DFAA) officials, Defense Agency (JDA) Director General Fukushima Nukaga announced that his agency would disband the DFAA and integrate it into the agency. Nukaga is worried that he might have to resign again from his post unless he came up with drastic measures to deal with the scandal, which is the most serious incident for JDA following the agency's procurement scandal in 1998. The government and ruling camp have been motivated to upgrade the JDA to the status of a ministry by integrating the DFAA into the JDA. However, since there is a growing cautious view in the New Komeito on upgrading the agency to ministry status, whether the JDA can carry out organizational reform is uncertain.

In a Budget Committee meeting yesterday morning of the House of Councillors, Nukaga stressed the need for organizational reform by disbanding the DFAA and integrating it into the JDA, saying:

"The Defense Facilities Administration Agency was established as a special procurement agency during the Occupation. Agency officials, having a sense of entitlement, did not have contact with the Defense Agency. Such circumstances created the breeding ground of corruption."

Nukaga appears to have wanted to prevent the scandal from throwing a blanket on a growing mood of upgrading the JDA to ministry status, which is the agency's earnest desire.

He seems to have thought that he should have carried out organizational reform when he stepped down from the JDA chief's post eight years ago to take responsibility for a procurement scandal.

He also stepped down in 2001 as minister in charge of financial affairs to take responsibility for having received donations from the scandal-tainted KSD, a mutual-aid organization for small and medium-scale businesses, even though he was then regarded as a candidate for a presidency of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

Due to the scandal this time, the New Komeito has put off making a decision to approve the submission of bills to revise the Defense Agency Establishment Law to the ongoing Diet session, although the government plans to do so.

The revision bill is aimed to implement the largest-scale organizational reform since JDA was established in 1954. The bill

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calls for merging the Defense Equipment Development Department and Procurement Department, including the functions of the former Procurement Headquarters, and creating an "Equipment Headquarters" by the unified department. The bills also calls for transferring part of the DFAA's policy-making function regarding the US military bases in Japan to a "Defense Facilities Division," which would be set up in the JDA. The ruling camp seem unlikely to approve submission of the revision bill soon after DFAA officials were arrested on suspicion of playing leading roles in rigging bids for agency projects.

The bid-rigging scandal has begun to have an dampening effect on the mood favoring the upgrade of the JDA to ministry status.

The government aims to submit a set of bills upgrading the JDA to ministry status after the passage of a fiscal 2006 budget to the current Diet session and to pass them through during the session. A senior JDA official commented: "We would like to upgrade the agency to ministry status under the Koizumi government." The agency has regarded the ongoing Diet session as a good occasion. The LDP has paid attention to the New Komeito's moves, with a LDP member with closed ties to defense interests saying, "After consulting with the New Komeito, the question is when the Cabinet makes a decision to submit the bills."

Commenting at a press conference on Feb. 1 on the scandal's effects on the notion of upgrading the JDA to ministry status, New Komeito leader Takenori Kanzaki said, "Some say that the scandal would apply the brakes, but others view that it has sparked the integration of the DFAA into the JDA." A senior New Komeito member was cautious:

"We cannot discuss the issue of upgrading the JDA to ministry status under the situation where we don't know how far the scandal will develop. It is dangerous to speed up discussions."

(3) Editorial: Utterly corrupt DFAA lets officials lead bid rigging as official duty

MAINICHI (Page 5) (Full)
February 2, 2006

The special investigation squad of the Tokyo District Public Prosecutors Office arrested three officials at the Defense Facilities Administration Agency (DFAA) on suspicion of leading bid-rigging schemes for air-conditioning projects ordered by the agency. The three are an incumbent deputy director general and two former officers. The bridge-construction scandal involving the vice president and other senior officials of now defunct Japan Highway Public Corporation last summer was disclosed last summer. Late last year, it was reported that electrical machinery makers rigged bids for projects at Narita Airport only late last

year. These incidents have drawn growing public criticism of the pattern of collusive ties between the public and private sectors. Regarding DFAA, investigation is under way in yet another bid-rigging case involving other major general contractors. Seeing the repeated occurrence of big-rigging scandals, we feel a strong sense of anger and disappointment.

Behind such bid rigging schemes is the practice of amakudari (descent from heaven), under which government officials land lucrative jobs in private firms after retirement. Officials involved in such a practice take advantage of their positions and

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use tax money for their own benefit. Don't they realize the viciousness and cowardice of the practice? The case this time is particularly horrendous. It is suspected that successive agency deputy directors general have been engaged in selecting and determining which companies would be awarded contracts based on how many retired agency officials the firms hired. In some cases, deputy directors general reportedly ordered their juniors to hurriedly cover them up by changing the already determined bidders.

In 1998, a breach of trust incident involving the former procurement headquarters in the Defense Agency was reported. The aim was to secure post-retirement jobs at the companies awarded the contracts for its officials. Reflecting on this, strict conditions have been attached for officials of DFAA or the Defense Agency to be hired within two years of retirement by firms with close ties to them. DFAA, however, had made arrangements to have judicial foundations hire deputy director generals temporarily until private firms hire them.

It is outrageous that the DFAA had determined even temporary jobs. It is necessary to consider future options for public corporations, but the problem is that such crimes had been continued systematically. In the recent case, prosecutors have not arrested responsible executives on the corporate side, the reason being that the agency officials took the initiative. What is worse, most of the executives came from DFAA. The agency is utterly corrupt and has made light of the public.

The deputy directors general appear to have engaged in bid rigging as part of their duties. It is likely that other senior officials were aware of such illegal practices and tacitly approved them. We expect the special investigation unit to carry out a thorough investigation to prove that the agency was systematically involved in the case as a whole.

Under the revised Antimonopoly Act, administrative surcharge payments have surged since this January. This measure is expected to work effectively to restrict private firms from engaging in bid-rigging practices. As long as there are public servants who are looking for posts after retirement, however, big-rigging schemes will never disappear. There will be no other means in the end but to gradually raise the retirement age and completely abolish the amakudari system in reforming the public servant system.

As shown by the recent DFAA case, the rule that was set by the National Personnel Authority to temporarily restrict retired government officials from being hired by firms with close ties to their agencies. Government officials must be prohibited from taking advantage of their positions to secure post-retirement jobs, although it is acceptable if they get jobs at private firms on their own. Using official positions in getting jobs is a sort of crime. The government is urged to work out measures to prohibit government agencies from arranging post-retirement jobs for their officers.

A punitive clause also should be incorporated in the Law of Collusive Bidding at the Initiative of Government Agencies at an early date.

(4) Japan-DPRK talks set for Feb. 4, with top priority given to progress on the abduction issue; Interview with Ambassador for

Diplomatic Normalization Koichi Haraguchi

TOKYO SHIMBUN (Page 2) (Almost full)
February 2, 2006

Prior to the upcoming talks between Japan and North Korea, Ambassador for Japan-North Korea Diplomatic Normalization Koichi Haraguchi was interviewed by the Tokyo Shimbun yesterday. Haraguchi emphasized: "Making progress on the abduction issue is a priority. Unless that issue is resolved, Japan cannot normalize diplomatic ties with North Korea." The following are the key points of the interview.

Interviewer: Takayoshi Goto

-- What is the outlook for the first bilateral talks with the DPRK in nearly three years and three months?

Haraguchi: "The upcoming talks differ from past rounds in two respects. First, Prime Minister Koizumi visited Pyongyang in 2002 and finalized the Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration. The declaration puts forward a direction (toward resolving outstanding issues). So, if we proceed along that direction in the negotiations, the talks will not run into the difficulties that have been experienced before.

"Second, the upcoming negotiations will simultaneously deal with three separate issues, including diplomatic normalization, in three separate working groups. We learned from the past round of talks that trying to deal with everything in one forum was inefficient, as it was difficult to reach a consensus on how much time should be devoted to each issue. With this new approach, we hope the upcoming talks will make progress that will allow specific steps to be taken."

-- What will Japan's basic approach be in these talks?

"The top priority is to make progress on the abduction issue. Security issues, including North Korea's nuclear and missile development, are also extremely important.

"Diplomatic relations will not be normalized without resolving the abduction and security issues. This policy line will not change. North Korea may put diplomatic normalization (that will directly lead to economic cooperation) ahead of other issues, but we on our part will respond in those talks after seeing how things are progressing in the other working groups, one on the abductions and the other on nuclear development."

-- There is the concern among the families of abductees that the abduction issue may be put on the backburner.

"I understand their feelings well. We will negotiate while keeping fully in mind our basic policy that we won't normalize diplomatic ties unless the abduction issue is resolved. North Korea has accepted our proposal to discuss pending issues in separate working groups, so I think they hope to see progress (on the abduction issue). If they want to move forward, then we will call on them to understand Japan's position."

-- How much time do you think will be needed before diplomatic normalization?

"Everything depends on how North Korea responds. If North Korean officials remain unwilling to resolve the abduction issue, it doesn't matter how hard we work. If they sincerely strive to resolve the issue, though, normalization will be possible."

DPRK negotiating team led by Ambassador Song Il Ho

The North Korean official in charge of diplomatic normalization talks is Ambassador Song Il Ho. Song is 50. He assumed office as deputy director-general of the Foreign Ministry's Asian Affairs Department after serving in such posts as a standing committee member of the DPRK-Japan Friendship Association and a research fellow of the Foreign Ministry. He attended preparatory meetings for the second round of Japan-DPRK summit talks in May 2004 as the official on the ground responsible for working-level talks with Japan, and in subsequent Japan-DPRK talks, he was on the DPRK negotiating team.

Jong Thae Hwa served as ambassador in the previous diplomatic normalization talks, but he retired last February. Since then, the post of ambassador had been left vacant, but this past January, Song was chosen to take the post.

Kim Chol Ho, deputy director-general of the Foreign Ministry's Asian Affairs Department, is in charge of the abduction issue, and Jong Thae Yang, deputy director-general of the ministry's US Affairs Department, is tasked with the security issue.

Kim has experience negotiating with Japan while in the post of chief of the Japan Division. Jong has served in the post of chief of the US Division. He attended the six-party talks held in last September.

(5) Editorial: Japan cannot resume US beef imports under current conditions

ASAHI (Page 3) (Full)
February 1, 2006

Consumers' distrust of US beef is growing deeper, with allegations emerging that the government abandoned its plan to inspect US beef processors prior to resuming US beef imports last December.

At a cabinet meeting, the government approved a report of replies to questions by Democratic Party of Japan members and submitted it to the Diet last November. The report included a plan to send Japanese officials to the US to inspect beef processors before and after resuming imports. But the government sent officers to the US only once.

In a meeting of the House of Representatives, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) Minister Nakagawa said: "We did not take action based on the decision made at the cabinet meeting." He then apologized. Later in the day, however, he said that the government did not break a promise, explaining: "The US has authorized slaughter facilities on its own responsibility, so it is impossible for Japan to judge whether the slaughterhouses have taken proper measures prior to resuming imports."

We cannot easily dismiss this problem as a simple mistake made when the written reply was worked out. The government's shifting

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explanations reflect the seriousness of the case. The government is now forced to pay the price for having given priority to quickly resuming imports over an effort to win consumer confidence.

America's sloppiness is quite intolerable. Only one month after Japan resumed US beef imports, backbones - designated as a specified risk material (SRM) - were found in a US beef shipment to Japan, although the US government had reiterated that thorough safety measures have been taken. Consumers must be feeling that what they had feared has come to pass.

Americans are less interested in the BSE issue and food safety in general than the Japanese, and we have doubts about the credibility of what the US promised. That is why Japan should have prepared an effective monitoring system on its own initiative.

The Japanese government sent an inspection team to the US the day after it decided to resume imports. But the teams inspected only 11 of the 40 facilities authorized by the US government. The facility that shipped beef with backbones attached was accredited after the inspection team returned to Japan.

At Japanese ports, imported beef is in principle subjected to sampling tests, so it is feared that SRM could be overlooked.

The US government has decided to compile a report documenting the cause of the incident and preventive measures. It then will present it to the Japanese government. In this envisioned scenario, MAFF and the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare will examine the report, and if the report is acceptable, Japan will resume US beef imports. But the outlook for this is now uncertain.

Japanese consumers have become very sensitive about the safety of US beef. In order to overcome the blunders made by both Japan and the US, the US must present a convincing report.

Japan banned US beef imports for two years. The US Congress and government continued to pressure Japan to resume imports in order to protect the country's livestock farmers. It is consumers, though, who will decide whether to accept US beef.

Japan also should expand its program of inspecting processing facilities in the US, as well as strengthen its quarantine system. Japan and the US should inspect a larger number of such facilities in the US. It might be an idea for both sides to share in the costs.

In addition to the distrust in the US government, questions are also being raised about the measures taken by the Japanese government in response. We are far from a situation in which Japan can reopen its market quickly. In order to regain consumer trust in US beef, there is no option but for both countries to make utmost efforts.

(6) Shaky Japan-US-China relations - the light and shadow of Koizumi diplomacy (Part 2): Yasukuni issue certain to shackle LDP presidential race; China, ROK working together to block shrine visits

MAINICHI (Page 2) (Full)

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January 31, 2006

On Jan. 26, when budget deliberations began in the Diet, Chinese Ambassador to Japan Wang Yi returned to his post after an absence of one and a half months since he temporarily left for Beijing last December. While he was away, a rumor flew about that he might have been recalled due to the complication of the Yasukuni issue.

Last Dec. 20, Wang and senior government officials, including Vice Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo, and a group of Japan experts from the government-affiliated think tank China Institute of Contemporary International Relations and the Chinese Academy of Social Science came together somewhere in Beijing to discuss Japan policy.

"Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is expected to step down in September. If the new prime minister visits Yasukuni Shrine, China would never concede to Japan on the historical issues."

The secret gathering aimed at reshaping China's basic policy toward Japan. That policy will form the core of diplomatic strategy toward Japan by the Chinese Communist Party's Political Bureau.

It is highly likely that China's strategy targets Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe, who favors prime ministerial shrine visits

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and is seen as the frontrunner in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presidential race to find a successor to Koizumi. With the prospect that Abe will succeed Koizumi, China, winning the United States and South Korea over to its side, intends to build a net to encircle Japanese lawmakers favoring a shrine visit. This is the point in the basic policy, says a source in Tokyo involved with Japan-China relations.

This secret meeting also hammered out this policy line: "China will apply political through the force of good economic relations between Japan and China. The private sector will move the government."

As if to tune in to China, South Korean Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Ban Ki-moon stated: "If the successor to Prime Minister Koizumi pays homage at Yasukuni Shrine, summit meetings between the two nations would remain difficult to schedule." Ban made this remark on Jan. 16 to a group of Japanese reporters who were in Seoul as part of an exchange of Japanese and South Korean reporters.

Some Japanese lawmakers have begun expressing discontent with Koizumi's shrine visits. On Jan. 17, former Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda remarked in a speech at the Mainichi

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Public Opinion Forum in Fukuoka City:

"If it is a matter of the heart, don't you think there are ways to avoid a dispute with other countries?"

On Jan. 26, the non-partisan parliamentary group, Council to Study a National Memorial Facility, met after one and a half months, with Fukuda in it.

The council is headed by Taku Yamasaki, former vice president of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Yamasaki, who has come forward as a presidential candidate, reiterated: "Our Asia

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diplomacy is now stalled. This situation must not be disregarded. The next government's role is expected to be crucial."

Former LDP Secretary General Koichi Kato, a council member, is critical of Koizumi's shrine visits. He noted:

"It is not wise policy to fan the flames of nationalism. If you do so, it will come back to haunt you, and would end up flat on your back. Japan may be in the process of feeling this boomerang effect."

Moreover, Japan Business Federation (Keidanren) Chair Hiroshi Okuda, influential in political circles said in his New Year's press conference that a successor prime minister should refrain from shrine visits.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe is objecting to this trend, arguing that the Yasukuni issue "should not be put on the list of major campaign issues in the presidential election." It is all right not to use the Yasukuni issue in the election campaign, but what will happen in actuality if Abe becomes the premier. Ichita Yamamoto is a member of the House of Councillors from the Mori faction who is the central figure among the group of lawmakers supporting Abe as a presidential candidate. He notes:

"Even if a pro-China lawmaker takes office as prime minister, relations with China would not go smoothly. If soon after taking office, Prime Minister Abe visited Yasukuni Shrine and then made a fresh decision, for instance, on freezing shrine visits for a while, then he would be able to contain the objections of the conservatives."

Foreign Minister Taro Aso, who supports the prime minister's shrine visits, stated in a speech at a meeting of New Komeito Upper House members on Jan. 28: "The best way would be for the Emperor to visit the shrine." This remark has created a stir.

The Emperor had visited to Yasukuni Shrine until 1975. Why did the incumbent foreign minister bring up such a visit at this time? There is speculation that he might have tried to project the difference in his approach from that of Abe, who has begun wavering. Needless to say, no one should link condolences to the souls of the war dead with political motives. But actual politics cannot free itself from the Yasukuni issue, given the entangled state of Japan's Asia diplomacy and the approaching LDP presidential election.

(7) Aso's call for the Emperor's Yasukuni visit sparks fears for the Emperor being used for political purposes; Some wonder why Aso made the comment with strong protests expected; Calls are genuine but too naive

TOKYO SHIMBUN (Pages 24, 25)
February 2, 2006

Foreign Minister Taro Aso's comment that it would be best for the Emperor to visit Yasukuni Shrine has created a sensation, immediately drawing fire from China, South Korea and other countries. It may have a serious impact on the race to determine the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)'s new president in September. Some also fear that it may end up embroiling the Emperor in political affairs.

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Aso held a press conference on Jan. 31, in which he explained his controversial Yasukuni statement this way:

"I have never said that I would like to see the Emperor visit the shrine under the current situation. I simply wanted to present a question as to what should be done to allow the government and the Emperor to spontaneously express their condolences to those who gave their lives for the country."

Aso sought the Emperor's visit to the war-related shrine in his speech in Nagoya on Jan. 28 in connection with Prime Minister Koizumi's shrine visits.

The domestic media immediately reported it in a critical tone. The New China News Agency also decried it the following day as a typical rightist view.

Such developments forced Aso to hold the press meeting Jan. 31. Later in the day, he also appeared on a nightly news show to minimize the impact of his comment, explaining that he made the statement from the viewpoint of the spirits of the war dead.

During his tenure as policy research council chairman, Aso also made this sensational comment: "(Korean people) began voluntarily adopting Japanese names during Japan's colonial rule." Last November after assuming the current post, Aso also said provocatively, "In the world, China and South Korea are the only countries that talk about Yasukuni."

Aso is not of course the first lawmaker who called for the Emperor's Yasukuni visit. In August 2004, Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara stated, "I would like to see the Emperor visit Yasukuni Shrine in his private capacity on behalf of the Japanese people." This statement also sparked controversy.

Shiro Akazawa, professor of modern Japanese political history at Ritsumeikan University, wondered why Aso made such a controversial comment at a time like this, saying:

"Mr. Aso has long been an advocate of official visits to the shrine. He seems to have turned up the volume of his call. Such calls were initially directed only at the Emperor and the prime minister, but the Emperor has gradually moved away from the focus, and the Imperial Household Agency apparently has no intention of setting foot in a minefield. I don't know what prompted Mr. Aso to make such a statement as foreign minister at a time like this when strong backlashes were expected from inside

and outside Japan. He stressed the viewpoint of the spirits of the war dead in calling for the Emperor's shrine visit, but not all people hailed 'Banzai' for the Emperor when they died. We cannot assume that all did (like Mr. Aso)."

Emperor Showa paid homage at Yasukuni on eight occasions in the postwar period, the one in 1975 being the last.

Yasukuni's collective enshrinement, including Class-A war criminals, is often cited in explaining his discontinuation of shrine visits. Emperor Akihito has not visited the shrine since ascending to the throne in 1989.

Last June, the government released a statement saying: "Emperor Showa had visited Yasukuni Shrine in his private capacity. The Emperor performs only such acts in matters of state as are

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provided for in the Constitution. Visiting shrines is not part of acts in matters of state."

Aso's statement was taken to indicate that the capacity argument made it difficult for the Emperor to visit the shrine.

But Akazawa thinks that Emperor Showa was opposed to enshrining Class-A war criminals at Yasukuni and that that was why he stopped visiting there after 1978.

Some wonder if the Emperor, the quintessential public figure, can do anything in his private capacity, while some others fear that the Emperor might be used politically.

Following Ishihara's comment urging the Emperor to visit Yasukuni, Imperial Household Agency Vice Grand Steward Shingo Haketa, currently grand steward, noted: "If the Emperor's conduct carries political significance, we have to think about it carefully."

Akazawa also said, "The Imperial Household Agency is expected to remain cautious about calls for visits to Yasukuni by the Emperor.

But many bereaved families and supporters backing Koizumi's Yasukuni visits are hopeful that his annual visits will help reopen the door for visits to the shrine by the Emperor.

Kyoto Sangyo University Prof. Isao Tokoro, who is an authority on imperial affairs, explained:

"To bereaved families and those worshiping the war dead, it is a long-cherished desire for the Emperor to start visiting Yasukuni because Emperor Showa kept visiting there until 1975 without creating any problems. Their desire is genuine but too naive. It is important to spread the correct perception of Yasukuni Shrine and the National Chidorigafuchi War Dead Cemetery throughout the world, including Japan."

Aso is a possible candidate for the LDP presidency. Will his controversial comment have any impact on the race?

Political commentator Minoru Morita said in a critical tone:

"His grandfather, Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida, openly referred to himself as the Emperor's subject. I think Aso, a supporter of Prime Minister Koizumi's shrine visits, also broached the Emperor in an attempt to play up his political identity for the presidential race. But it simply backfired. Aso may or may not drop out of the presidential race, but such would be a minor political matter. But if Japan became isolated in the international community because of his comment, that might harm Japan's national interests, which would be a major problem."

Saitama University Constitutional Law Prof. Takashi Miwa said:

"Yasukuni Shrine is a religious facility. Under the Constitution, it would be problematical for any public figure -- whether it's the prime minister or the Emperor -- to visit Yasukuni. Calls for

a visit to the shrine by the Emperor, who carries greater authority than the prime minister, are a real a problem, especially for the Imperial Household Agency."

SCHIEFFER